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AUTHOR De Mott, John
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ABSTRACT

Despite the development of many news specialists, complaints persist that the news media are not giving sufficient attention to the fundamental needs and interests of their readers and viewers. The media need to take a more anthropological approach to their conception of news in order to effectively serve the interests of all citizens. Taking an anthropological approach, the news media would develop a well-balanced team of specialists to cover the following areas: food, trade, shelter, sex (including marriage, family, and child care), physical security, health, recreation, education, beauty, and faith (religion). The assignment of one reporter to each of these areas of basic human needs should provide adequate coverage of the public's basic concerns. Whenever news coverage begins to emphasize one of the areas, a condition that exhibits the "self reflexive" nature of news, specialists in the other areas could be expected to bring overall coverage back toward a sound balance. (RL)

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TOUCHING ALL THE BASICS

An Anthropological Approach to the Further Improvement of Modern Community News Coverage

By John De Mott, PhD

Associate Professor of Communications

Department of Journalism

Temple University

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Wherever news executives gather nowadays, the talk eventually works its way around to the competitive capture, care and feeding of the increasing number of specialized reportorial breeds found in today's newsroom.

More and more specialized reporters are still needed, it's conceded generally, to meet the standards of journalistic performance demanded by an increasingly complex society and sophisticated public.

There has been a considerable amount of specialization in the past, of course, and our profession has already bred a large number of specialized reporters and editors--the sports writer, the police reporter, the society writer, the political analyst, the women's page editor, the church "editor," the theater critic, the stock market reporter, the real estate news editor, the school reporter, the art "editor," the travel news editor, the hunting and fishing columnist, the gardening colunist, the music critic, the fashion news editor," the television news editor, urban affairs "analyst," etc.

The proliferation of special field reporters, writers and editors continues, as it should.

For example, wire services have been engaged in developing specialists in automobile racing, golf, and several additional sub-areas of expertise.

More recently, the St. Petersburg Times has named a "floating editor," to cover boating in that state.

"After writing some 6,000 of his popular 'On the Waterfront' columns for the Times," Editor & Publisher magazine reported, "Red Marston is looking for new challenges, new adventures aboard his 38-foot trawler, Final Edition.

"Marston becomes 'floating editor,'" E&P explained, "as he hands over his 16-year position of outdoors editor to Jim Ryan, prize-winning environmental writer, who authors a news column....'all outdoors'."

Throughout the country, the assignment of color or ethnic-oriented reporters--black, Chicano, and red--continues, for better reporting on the activities and interpreting of life styles of our minorities.

Also as it should, of course.

Where are the media going, though?

That's a question bugging almost every news executive; and it should also be of major concern to critics of the media. The media cannot support a proliferation of such specialists endlessly.

In an era of financial inflation, with its inevitable increase of economic pressure on any news operation budget, the executive must continue asking himself if he's getting the maximum degree of specialization--real expertise--for the organization's investment in money, man-hours, and personnel recruitment, training and supervision.

To give his medium's news report the desired scope, depth, and balance, the executive shouldn't let the evolution of special readership groups dominate the medium's development of specialists. Neither should specialists be developed in response to the departmentalization of display advertising and the need for a special editor to fill in the space around such advertising with related news/editorial content of a newspaper.

On the contrary, the development of news reporting and editing specialists should be guided by a plan designed to provide the best balance in news--and the greatest flexibility covering it--that is possible under given circumstances like the size of a reporting staff and the number of man-hours represented.

For the most efficient operation, of course, a news reporting staff must include all of the following:

1. General assignment reporters, available on short notice to cover breaking news, regardless of its nature.
2. Regular beat reporters, assigned to cover the city's conventional news-gathering centers, generally a specific building serving as the headquarters of an organization in government, etc.
3. Specialists, responsible for general surveillance over a particular area of news, and coverage of developments in it.

Each day, of course, the functions carried out by all three of those newsmen overlap in many ways. Integrating their efforts and coordinating their activities on specific assignments is the exciting challenge of news coverage tactics.

Planning the most productive development of specialists, however, is a matter of overall news coverage strategy.

Balance as the major objective

Although the chief function of each news specialist is to provide the expertise for improved coverage in his selected field, the proper development of a team of specialists can assure better balance in the comprehensive report of any news medium.

If the news executive divides the entire range of human needs and interests among the members of his staff, he can provide a built-in safeguard against over-emphasis in one area at the expense of the others.

Because of the "self-reflexive nature of news," as some social scientists have termed the phenomenon, any news event of a sensational nature leads to a proliferation of related news reports that distort a medium's image of reality and bias the medium's activity toward over-reporting and therefore over-emphasizing related developments.

The news gathering, reporting and editing process has its "hang-ups," naturally. Honestly acquired, in the effort to provide prompt and complete coverage of any development, they have to be recognized and treated, nevertheless.

The crying need is for a bias-correction tonic to be injected into the process periodically, and such an influence can be exerted by experts in covering the other areas of news.

Pursuing his own special interest, the specialist is less a captive of the big "spot" news event being reported today, and therefore escapes heavy involvement in it more readily.

As the excitement of the moment begins to subside, a specialist can be heard, frequently, arguing that more attention be given to some interesting thing he's discovered in a quite different area of the community's life.

It's important, therefore, that a team of specialists be developed to promote expert coverage of all man's basic needs and interests. For it is man's needs and interests that create the pattern of life and culture in any community.

"Cultures develop as answers to the problems of individual and group living," an anthropologist has pointed out.

"...One imperative of living is to keep alive," E. Adamson Hoebel observed, "and all surviving biological forms are so built that a sufficient number of the species stays alive long enough to reproduce a succeeding generation. Living forms, therefore, have a built-in survival capacity relative to the environments they have experienced in the past. Cultures consist, on the one hand, of set ways of meeting the survival needs of individuals.

"Because of the prolonged dependency of the human infant," Hoebel remarked, "a stable societal and group relationship is a biological prerequisite to continuance of the species. Cultures provide individuals with ways in which to hunt and fish, make fires and tools, defend themselves, relate to other members of their society, cure their illnesses, and assuage their fears and anxieties. Cultures provide the individual with 'proved' ways to meet the needs for food, shelter, safety, reproduction (sex), relaxation, and psychic security.

"Societies, too, have their needs," Hoebel added, "which must be met by each culture if the societies are to survive."

Those needs have been identified by anthropoligists and other social scientists as the "functional prerequisites of social survival and continuity."

Anthropologist John W. Bennett and sociologist Melvin M. Tumin identify six such prerequisites:

(1) To maintain the biological functioning of the group members.
(2) To reproduce new members for the group.
(3) To socialize new members into functioning adults.
(4) To produce and distribute goods and services necessary to life.
(5) To maintain order within the group, and between itself and outsiders.
(6) To define the 'meaning of life' and maintain the motivation to survive and engage in the activities necessary for survival.

"Every culture system therefore includes," Bennett and Tumin observes, "established ways of providing food, shelter, and health and of organizing sex relations, enculturation of individuals, the economy, technology, trade, government and law, war and defense, and a meaningful world view."

Taking an anthropological approach to the news, therefore, the development of a well-balanced team of specialists would appear to require the assignment of at least one newsman to each of the following fields:

Food--The staff of life and the earning of one's sustenance.

Trade--a market place for the exchange of one's work.

Shelter--a roof over one's head, and also planning the larger physical environment in the community around one's home.

Sex--and marriage, the family, the care of children, and larger social problems in the community.

Physical Security--the public safety, government, the rule of law, enforcement of the law and the administration of justice.

Health--both physical and mental.

Recreation--relaxation, play, and entertainment.

Education--preparation for more meaningful employment and cultivation of the intellect.

Beauty--the fine arts, "cultural" pursuits, etc.

Faith--religion, an answer to one's search for the good, as art is the answer to one's search for the beautiful and education a quest for the truth.

To lists like the preceding one, a journalism educator has suggested that we add the need for organized communication.

"The mass communications industries are institutions," Professor J. Edward Gerald once observed, with "functions located centrally in the network

of the social relationships, ranking very high in our arrangement of institutions according to social importance. The family, the institutions which have grown up around the sex drive and the attendant task of rearing children, might occupy the first category in any such arrangement. The institutions of agriculture and business, satisfying the need for food, are on the same level as the family. Government is next, and language and writing, out of which the mass communications have grown, are either a part of government, as in totalitarian countries, or on a level of their own, in countries where society and government have separate identities and separable institutions."

For purposes of this discussion, however; let's stay with Bennett and Tumin's ten.

They cover the field, generally.

Need for flexibility

The assignment of one reporter to each of the preceding fields should give a news medium assurance that each of the basic concerns of its readers is reflected in coverage of that city's news.

It's obvious, however, that the news coverage cannot be expected to divide itself neatly and equally among the basic concerns identified by anthropologists.

At any given time, the residents of any city are going to have more interest in one area of news than another. If people feel insecure physically, they are going to want more news about law and order. On the other hand, if they feel secure physically, they're going to be more interested in news involving other areas--recreation, culture, and religion, for example.

If adequate housing is available throughout a city, then there is going to be less demand for news concerning it. Perhaps the people's interests will then turn more toward problems in health care, or the schools.

The constant shifting of general public interest from one field to another dictates the deployment of general assignment reporters, the daily activities of

regular beat reporters, and even the development of additional specialists--to some degree, at least.

However, having at least one member of each news reporting organization's staff assigned to each of the basic human need areas identified by anthropologists serves as a kind of insurance against its being slighted in the pattern of over all long range coverage.

Whenever news coverage begins to become over-balanced toward one area, because of the "self-reflexive nature of news," one of the specialists in this proposed system of staff development could be expected to bring it back toward a sound balance.

"Look," such a specialist could be expected to say, "we're becoming so preoccupied with the cost of food that we're over-looking an approaching crisis in our nation's transportation system."

Or, "we're not giving adequate coverage to the problem of medical care for the aged because we've developed a preoccupation with the problems of youth." Or the financial plight of local governments.

Although it obviously won't solve every news reporting problem, the development and assignment of specialists along the lines suggested by anthropologists should provide a greatly improved balance in the news coverage of any community.

It's certainly worth the effort.

An Important Fringe Benefit

Once a news reporting organization's staff has begun to cultivate an anthropological outlook toward its reporting, that attitude can be used as the basis for improving its coverage in any given area of news.

Let's take the area of business news, for illustration. Covering the activities of any organization, the business reporter can generate many additional news stories--and maintain a much better balance in his overall coverage--by taking an anthropological approach.

Every organization has the same needs as an individual, really, and interesting stories can be developed concerning how any organization goes about meeting those basic needs.

Those basic needs, remember, are ~~sustance~~ sustenance, a marketplace, shelter, reproduction, physical security, health, recreation, education, beauty and faith.

Obviously, a business organization's "food" is money. Where does it get its investment capital? Its raw materials and supplies for the manufacture of its product?

Where is the market for its product?

Next, the reporter needs to cover any organization's problems in building, maintaining and protecting from fire and other dangers its manufacturing plant, offices and other physical properties--to keep a roof over its corporate head.

And yes, the reporter needs to realize, General Motors has a sort of sex life.

Which reminds us, of course, of the story about the secretary who answered the telephone one day to find a caller asking:

"Do you have a Sexhauer there?

"Lord no," she replied, "we don't even get a coffee break."

Seriously, however, every organization has to reproduce itself somehow, just like the human race. The employees who leave, retire or die need to be replaced. So the reporter needs to explain a company's recruitment and employment activities. Often the story involves a corporation's attempts to change its image, to attract the young--to adapt its personnel policies and practices to the "life style" of the "now" generation.

The news reporter asking himself whether or not he's giving adequate attention to any organization's need for security wonders, naturally, what's happening to the organization's relationship with government agencies. Also, what is the state of its public relations?

The organization's need for health--physical and mental--is similar to any individual's. Insurance plans, advertising, labor relations, planning and development are all a part of its effort to meet that basic need.

Any organization must have extensive expertise, as well as providing some special training for most of its employees. It must keep itself informed about all kinds of things--the activities of government, suppliers, customers, competitors, etc. It must know about developments in related fields. The company's information and research program merits a reporter's attention, obviously.

Whether it's manufacturing ~~planes~~ pianos or manure-spreaders, any organization has a basic need for aesthetic satisfaction. Every automobile manufacturing company likes to think that it's making a thing of real beauty, not just providing transportation. Even an asphalt plant's owners would rather have it built in a way that it didn't outrage their aesthetic sensibilities. No man likes to hire an ugly secretary, when there's a pretty woman available for the job and she types just as fast as the ugly one. For those reasons, and many additional ones, a business organization's search for more beauty, in its environment, can inspire countless news stories.

Finally, any organization needs a faith. Perhaps that faith is a hard one, like the survival of the fittest in an economic jungle. Such an organization must have a set of principles by which to live; and if he's a good newsman, the reporter is interested.

Taking an anthropological approach to news, the individual newsman is going to cultivate a productive interest in all aspects of any organization's life; just as a news organization is going to improve its overall coverage by making sure that it touches all the anthropological bases--giving deserved attention to all of man's basic needs--in the development of its team of reportorial specialists.

Those basics are basic, aren't they?

Needed: Redefinition of the news

Despite the development of many news specialists, complaints that the news media are not giving sufficient attention to the elemental needs and interests of their readers continue to persist.

For many years, critics have said that our prevailing concept of news is obsolescent. Current efforts to modernize it represent a retreat from the news~~paper~~ media's professed objective of reporting all significant developments in its geographical area of responsibility. Today's news~~papers~~ media are endangered by a reactionary movement in the direction of making it a medium of selective news coverage reflecting an ideological point of view. In order to achieve ~~its~~ their historic ideal of disinterested public service to all segments of the community with a minimum of discrimination and favoritism, the news~~paper~~ media must reorganize ~~its~~ their standard surveillance system radically and make it more capable of detecting developments of significance in all major areas of interest represented in the modern urban community.

As one newspaper editor observed a few years ago, the news media must make themselves the general public's intelligence system, an impartial source of intelligence serving the interests of all citizens--not just those of a particular class, race, generation, sex, or ideology.

To do that effectively, the media must take a more anthropological approach to their conception of news, and implement the concept by making certain that a more scientific approach like that of the anthropologist is reflected in its community surveillance system and organization for news reporting.

Journalism's prevailing surveillance system of reportorial beats established on a geographical basis biases coverage and has resulted in a distorted concept of news. The concept's distortion can be corrected, largely, by revising the prevailing standard surveillance system to conform to modern society's fundamental character.

There have been some efforts to temper the prejudice resulting from the standard beat system, but they have been of modest success. The problem's solution requires a systematic effort and plan based upon the findings of anthropologists concerning the fundamental interests and activities of all peoples, adjusted as they have been to fit today's urbanized society.

Frequent reminders of such a plan's sound foundation in anthropological studies should prove helpful in guiding further refinement of the existing news reporting system in this country, and increasing its fidelity.

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